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November 24, 2014

The Challenge of Peace: A Commitment to Prayer, Presence, and Dialogue

For several months our community has nervously waited as a grand jury has deliberated the evidence in the shooting death of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. I and other religious and civic leaders have repeatedly called for prayer, peace, and calm. Since the grand jury received the case in August, we have seen offensive and violent outbursts by protesters, and acts of civil disobedience. Despite our calls for peace, which Michael Brown's family have echoed, we continue to see that segments of our community have not fully renounced the tendency to lash out with antagonistic behavior and violence.

I implore each of you: Choose peace! Reject any false and empty hope that violence will solve problems. Violence only creates more violence. Let's work for a better, stronger, more holy community—one founded upon respect for each other, respect for life, and our shared responsibility for the common good.

In 1979, Saint John Paul II visited the war-torn and weary nation of Ireland to decry years of violence. "Violence is evil..." the pope said. "Violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems." How true this saint's words are. He didn't merely condemn violence; he also aptly described the depravity of violent behavior by saying:

"Violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the very fabric of society."

Drawing inspiration from St. John Paul II, one of the 20th century's preeminent figures of hope and peace, I issue the following challenges to members of our community:

- Commit to learning how to truly love each other. If we do this, then we will learn to love our neighbor. Show children the path of forgiveness and we will see walls of division crumble. Your homes are the foundation of our community. If your homes are full of forgiveness, they will be temples of peace. Our communities, cities, state, and nation will enjoy a lasting, fulfilling peace only if it begins in the home.

I again echo the words of St. John Paul II: "make your streets and neighborhoods centers of peace and reconciliation. It would be a crime against youth and their future to let even one child grow up with nothing but the experience of violence and hate."

- Youth, remember that you are not only creating the world of tomorrow, but you are a vital part of the world today. St. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: "For whatever a man sows, that he will also reap." So, ask yourself: Are you sowing seeds of division, resentment, and discontent? These will only lead to anger and hatred. Choose instead to sow seeds of reconciliation, dignity, honor, and respect. Begin creating the world you want to see. Do not listen to those who instigate aggression. Reject violence. Embrace peace.
- Please pray. Pray unceasingly for peace. Pray for our leaders and pray for your neighbors. If you feel called to act, do so only after prayer. Blessed Mother Teresa knew the proper formula. She spent a holy hour in prayer every day; it was only after prayer that she would serve. So, too, must it be for us.

- Finally, I issue this challenge to all religious, political, social and law enforcement leaders: Join me in asking the Lord to make us instruments of peace. We, as leaders, need wisdom, compassion, and courage in order to combat the brokenness and division that confronts us. We must be leaders who help heal, not inflict hurt. We must be leaders who can come together to address issues like family breakdown, racial profiling, quality education, abuses of authority, lack of gainful employment, fear of one another, mistrust of authority, and many other needs. We must ask the tough questions and find lasting solutions.

To that end, I reiterate my commitments which I made at our Mass for Peace and Justice at the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis on August 20:

- 1) My pledge of support, and that of the Archdiocese, to assist the churches in Ferguson and the surrounding area to deal with issues of poverty and racism they have in their hearts.
- 2) The establishment of the commission on human rights in the Archdiocese of St. Louis.
- 3) That the St. Charles Lwanga Center study and offer concrete solutions to decrease violence in our communities.
- 4) An ongoing commitment to provide scholarships, so that young people can get a quality education in our Catholic schools.
- 5) That each priest in the Archdiocese of St. Louis to offer a Mass for Peace and Justice.

These are small, initial steps. Long-term solutions will ultimately come about when we are quick to apologize for our faults, and quick to forgive the faults of others.

With the grand jury decision not to indict police officer Darren Wilson, I know that many feel hurt, betrayed, forgotten, and powerless. I know anger, disappointment, and resentment, and fear abound in our community at this moment. But we must accept this decision as the proper functioning of our justice system. In our collective desire for justice, we can be blinded by the poisonous desire for vengeance, which can be contagious and bring a desire for violence. We all want justice, so we should respect the integrity of our system of justice as something that aims for the common good.

This grand jury decision is not an excuse for more violence. Now is the time to channel emotions in a way that helps build up our community, to become more active in your church or religious community, to volunteer at a food pantry or community service organization, to take part in political activity, to mentor a young person. Whatever you do, do not lash out with violence at your brothers and sisters. Do not seek to destroy or divide. Instead, we must come together as a community through prayer, mutual understanding, and forgiveness if we are to obtain peace. Rather than fuel the fires of hatred and division, we should strive for peace in our own hearts and share it with those around us. Violence does not lead to peace; they are opposing forces and cannot coexist.

I urge everyone to join me in praying for the Brown family as they continue to grieve the loss of Michael, as well as for police officer Darren Wilson and his family. Both families need prayers now more than ever.

With profound hope in the power of the Holy Spirit, and through the intercession of Our Lady, Undoer of Knots, I ask all the faithful in the Archdiocese of St. Louis as well as all people of faith to join me in praying for peace and justice in our community.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert J. Carlson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Most Reverend Robert J. Carlson
Archbishop of St. Louis